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## EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES: WHAT CAN CHILDREN TELL US?

### Abstract

This paper presents child data generated in a pilot project of the *ACCESS Study of Child and Family Services*, a research program of how child and family services align with the interests and needs of local families. Underpinned by social capital theories, the pilot study was undertaken by a partnership of local early childhood services within an inner urban precinct of Brisbane. These services included two childcare centres, two kindergartens/preschools, one playgroup and one primary school. 76 children aged three to eight years were asked, in informal conversations with their caregivers, to comment on their experiences in the service and to consider possible advice they might give to newcomers who were to take part in the service. Theoretical perspectives from the sociology of childhood are used to examine children's accounts of their lived experience in early childhood services.

### Background to the study

A significant and growing body of research attests to the benefits of effective services for young children and their families, as well as to the longer-term social and economic benefits for communities (Ball, 1994; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Pascal et al., 1999). While a strong theoretical case is emerging for the development of effective, integrated child and family services to enhance social capital and community capacity building (Putnam, 1993) little Australian research is available to guide and support such processes. The ACCESS research program was initiated by Tayler (1999) to redress the paucity of Australian research evidence and to address the need to establish local evidence-based models of integration. Studies within this program use the theoretical frames of community capacity building (Putnam, 1993) and human ecology (Bowes & Hayes, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1999) to examine service provision in local communities with a view to encouraging and supporting the development of local community solutions (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) for better meeting the needs of consumers.

During 2000, the program examined the perspectives of families on a range of issues including relevance and expectations of and satisfaction and dissatisfaction with local service provision. Tayler et al. (2001a) found that parents look for services that are of high quality, have a variety of facilities, are close to home, and have a sound reputation in the local community. While they were largely satisfied with service provision parents noted numerous suggestions for improvement.

### Children in research

Despite the obvious impact of services on children, children's views of service provision are rarely heard. According to Woodhead and Faulkner (2000), *significant knowledge gain results when children's active participation in the research is deliberately solicited and when their perspectives, views and feelings are accepted as genuine, valid evidence* (p. 31). Yet, with the exception of studies as early as 1989 by Armstrong and Sugawara, and more recently by Farrell, Tayler and Tennent (2002), Sheridan and Samuelson (2001), and Evans and Fuller (1998), investigations of children's perceptions have been limited.

A distinguishing feature of this research program is that the researchers listened to children - not just to their parents. Children's sites of experience (Qvortrup, 2000), in which children

are seen as competent informants on their own lives (Alanen, 1992), acknowledges the human rights of children to participation in relevant social processes (Castelle, 1989). This paper examines children's views of the services chosen largely for them by parents. It is not surprising that children's accounts of their own experience in these services may vary from those of their parents, given the situated character of their understandings of experience and the notion that children inhabit a universe that is "phenomenologically distinct" (Boyden, 1997, p.224) from that of their parents. It was seen, therefore, as conceptually sound to speak with children, and not exclusively to adults about their experiences in child and family services.

Importantly too, while the ACCESS researchers recognize the salience of children's changing competence over time (Schaffer, 1993) and the systematized assignment of gendered roles (Farrell, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990), this paper avoids the "disciplinary singularity" (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p. 31) associated with selecting either developmental or gender frames to analyze this corpus of child data. Rather, we use, in broad terms, the wide-angle lens of the sociology of childhood (Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994) to examine the child data.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Researchers sought the views of 76 children aged 3 to 8 years who were currently utilising one of the six early childhood services that agreed to participate in the study. These services comprised two childcare centres, one playgroup, two kindergarten preschools, and one primary school. All were located in one inner city suburb. Most children in the study were from English-speaking backgrounds. Only those children for whom informed voluntary consent was obtained participated in the conversations. As Clark and Moss (2001) note, it is not sufficient to acknowledge the rights of children to express an opinion, we must also respect their right to remain silent.

### **Measures and analysis**

Children were interviewed by caregivers and were asked the following questions: Why do you come here? What do you really like about coming here? Is there anything you don't like about being here? Additionally, children were shown a picture of a child and were asked what this 'new friend' would need to know if they were to take part and enjoy being at this centre or school.

Verbatim transcripts of children's audio-recorded conversations were analysed to identify the categories that children use to describe their experiences of a particular service. This analytical approach examines the categories that children, as data generators, employ to represent their experience (Silverman, 1998).

## **Findings**

### **Why do you come here?**

The nature of the service appeared to shape children's reasons for being in the program. Children attending childcare viewed their enrolment as a function of their parents' employment. For instance, a three-year-old explained, *My Daddy goes to work and Mummy goes to work... so there is someone to look after you*. Children at preschool and school, on the other hand, believed that they came to "learn" to do things and to prepare for the future. At preschool, one child explained that she *needed to learn more...to write my name*. In Year 1, children explained that they had to learn *running writing... subtraction and multiplication... maths and hard stuff*, while in Year 2, learning about social studies and science were also discussed. Already looking to the future, a Year 3 child explained that you came to school *so that you can learn and when you grow up you know a lot of things and can work on the business*. Several children also saw the services as a catalyst for socialisation. For many,

making, meeting, or being with friends was reason enough for being there.

### **What do you like about coming here?**

Children's responses to this question again varied according to the service type. The younger children in the playgroup, for example, focused on favoured toys, play equipment and on specific activities offered in the program. These included *Humpty Dumpty...swings... blocks... playdough...and the flying fox*. In contrast, school children tended to focus on specific subjects (such as *maths, art, science*), activities (for example, *soccer, science experiments, ... learning information from books, videos and computers,....making interesting things*), and people (for example, *my teacher*), as well as making friends. Two children, clearly delighted with their school claimed, *I love school, especially this one, it's better than most schools. Well...the teachers are much more nice and much easier and the work is easy and everything works out well, and It's a perfect school. I like everything.*

### **What don't you like about coming here?**

Regardless of their age, children's responses clustered around the adverse behaviours of others or getting into trouble. At playgroup, a three-year-old commented, *I don't like muck up... people being naughty*. At school, children referred to instances of bullying, teasing and getting hurt, often at the hands of older peers, as negative experiences. For example, a Year 3 child complained that during soccer, the *grade sixers or sevens crowd around and elbow us*. Similarly, his peer stated that an older boy takes their ball *and then he'll get his other friends and they come and tease us*. A Year 1 boy complained that he didn't like to be *pushed and spited at*, while another boy in Year 1 succinctly stated *I don't like it when people bully*. Some responses indicated that children were highly socialized and resigned to the institutional mores imposed by school life. For example, a child in Year 2 commented, *I don't mind getting into trouble cause you get used to detention... in most of the detentions you just pick up two pieces of rubbish and then go*. As another Year 2 child indicated, some children had successfully circumvented the system. This girl explained, *P was lucky because she got a detention but it was after lunch, so she had to do it the next day...but she was away the next day and then when she came back the teacher had forgotten....so she never got the detention*.  
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### **What would a new person need to know in order to enjoy being here?**

Not surprisingly, both the type and complexity of advice offered by the children varied according to their age. Advice from younger children centred on enjoyment of 'fun' activities, while the older, school-aged children tended to focus on knowledge of, and compliance with, institutional protocols and rules. At playgroup, one child suggested that a new person would need to know that *you can play with any toys*, while at childcare, a four-year-old simply suggested *Digimon*. Other suggestions from children at childcare included *playing... playing dress ups, ... playing with trucks, ... playdough, ... and, tell him what food he's having*. At school, children's suggestions became increasingly sophisticated and reflective. Recalling his own experiences, a Year 2 boy noted, *like when I was in Year 1, a boy had to show me around and I was the first one to be his partner... so.... we'd show him where the toilets were and everyone's name in the class and let him play with us...and show him where to get a drink and like year 1 and 2 are supposed to eat under the shed (sometimes we don't). He has to be quiet in the class ... and no playing in the toilets.*

Older children also demonstrated an intricate knowledge of the social geography and daily routines that punctuate school life. As another Year 2 child explained, *underneath this building here is out of bounds – unless it's raining. Big lunch is only one hour and if you've been down there for five minutes and a bell rings, well that's a wet weather bell and that means it's too wet to play outside so you come upstairs and play*. By Year 3, a growing awareness of diplomacy was also evident, with one child suggesting, *you need to say like, yeah, it's a very nice school and nice people...don't tell them it's a horrid school with mean people cause then they won't want to come.*

## Discussion

Most children in the study relished the opportunity to learn, to play with toys and to meet or play with others. For children across all settings, opportunities to socialise were also important. Indeed, according to several children, the primary reason for coming to the service was to make or be with friends. Services were characterised by the salient direct experiences children had with artefacts (books and toys) and the relationships that developed primarily with their peers. Noteworthy, though, was the lack of or limited reference by the children to adults (both caregivers and parents) in the various settings.

Children's positive experiences, however, were sometimes marred by the negative behaviours of peers. Acts of aggression were also a "least favourite" activity among day care children in a study by Armstrong and Sugawara (1989) and one of five things that children in Evans and Fuller's (1998) study disliked about nursery school. Many school-aged children in this study cited instances of bullying and used sophisticated category membership (e.g. "the bully") to essentialize (Davies, 1998) and caricature the negative behaviour that threatens the desired social order (Danby, 1998). These children's accounts reflect the prevalence of bullying in schools and its potentially harmful emotional and physical impacts (Farrell, 1999). By offering newcomers advice that stemmed from their own experiences of the services, children also revealed themselves to be *competent participants* (Danby & Baker, 1998).

The ACCESS study utilised the methodological innovation of drawing on child accounts of their everyday lives in child and family services, rather than relying conventionally on adult accounts of how they and their children experience the services, as reliable evidence of the phenomena. Its conceptual derivation is that both children's and adults' accounts are valued in human services – the very services that are designed ostensibly to enhance child, family and community wellbeing. Children's authentic accounts of governance and regulation are found here to be embedded within the institutional functions, social rituals, behavioral sanctions, and sophisticated category membership of the particular service. In sum, they contribute new knowledge and lend weight to the policy imperative of building capacity within humane and democratic communities (Dewey, 1958; Green, 1995), including child and family services, where children and their families are free to participate, to be aware of the needs of others, to work cooperatively and to experience connectedness and relationship based on trust and mutuality.

The study affirms the importance of listening to parents and children – the key stakeholders in early childhood services. Both must be respected as "social and cultural actors" (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000, p.31), whose accounts should underpin the nature of, and future directions in, the provision of child and family services.

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